

Traditional, Blended, or Online: Business Student Preferences and Experience with Different Course Formats

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Abstract

As institutions of higher education continue to increase the number of courses offered in blended and online formats, it is critical to investigate student perceptions and experience relevant to the different delivery modes. The purpose of the article is to report the results of a survey comparing student perceptions of different course formats in three main areas. First, the study examines student preference for different course formats such as traditional, online, or blended. Second, the study evaluates student experience with different course formats relevant to learning, study time, expected grade and self-teaching. Third, the study identifies techniques and pedagogical tools that students consider effective for learning in Web-based courses. Despite the increasing enrolment in blended and online courses, the results indicate preference for and more positive experience in traditional courses. In addition, the results suggest that students consider podcasts and videos over course content more effective for learning than threaded discussions or forums.

Key words: *online education; e-learning; blended course formats; student preference and experience; business courses; pedagogical tools.*

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Introduction

Online education or distance learning plays an increasingly important role in higher education. According to the results of a survey of over 2,800 institutions of higher education, 32% or over 6.7 million students have taken at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Although the growth rate of online enrollment has slowed from over 30% ten years ago to 10%, this is significantly higher than the overall growth rate of 1% in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2013). A previous study by Allen and Seaman found that 65% of reporting US institutions considered online learning to be a critical part of their long-term strategy (2011).

As different course formats continue to be integrated into higher education, students' perceptions regarding the different delivery modes are important to determine future course offerings. Previous research has produced conflicting results relevant to students' perceptions of and satisfaction with the different course formats (Borstorff & Lowe, 2007; Fish & Snodgrass, 2016; Sanford, Ross, Rosenbloom, & Singer, 2017).

Additional research has focused comparing the quality of instruction in different course formats based on learning outcomes. The results of these studies have produced interesting, yet contradictory results. Some previous studies have found higher learning outcomes for traditional courses (Coates, Humphreys, Kane, & Vachris, 2004; Crawford et al., 2008; Evans, 2015; Flanagan, 2014; Gratton-Lavoie & Stanley, 2009; Mahmood, Mahmood, & Malik, 2012; Trawick, Lile, & Howsen, 2010), while other studies have found higher learning outcomes for Web-based courses (Gratton-Lavoie & Stanley, 2009; Harmon, Alpert, & Lambrinos, 2014; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). In addition, numerous studies have reported no statistically significant differences between the different course formats (Cavanaugh & Jacquemin, 2015; Larson & Sung, 2009; Ni, 2013; Stack, 2015; Zacharis, 2010).

Despite the plethora of research in this stream, many of the studies are plagued by conflicting results or small sample sizes. In addition, numerous studies report results based on data collected in a single class or focus on the effectiveness of a single pedagogical tool. Further more, a relatively limited number of the studies conducted have focused on the perceptions of students enrolled in business courses and even fewer have compared all three delivery modes. This study extends the literature by evaluating business students' preferences for and experiences in traditional, blended, and online courses. In addition, students' perceptions are examined regarding the effectiveness of various pedagogical tools for online delivery. The results of this study have important implications for administrators regarding course offerings and for instructors regarding effective course design for Web-based instruction to document continuous improvement and assurance of learning to meet changing accreditation requirements.

Literature Review

The prevalence of online instruction is evidenced by the fact that the number of students enrolling in online courses has more than tripled in the last 10 years (Allen & Seaman, 2013). As online learning has become a more prominent method of instruction in higher education, research has posed concerns about effective course design (Yang & Cornelious, 2004) and the issue of quality concerns (Chao, Saj, & Tessier, 2006) for colleges and universities.

The US Education Department has issued new regulations governing distance education and has increased pressure on accrediting agencies to monitor programs that offer hybrid and online courses (Kelderman, 2013). In response, accreditors are requiring colleges to prove that learning outcomes are the same regardless of mode of delivery. Accrediting agencies such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)

and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) view Web-based learning not as a separate entity to traditional learning, but as another venue for education. Both agencies emphasize the need to evaluate online programs and develop policies and procedures that ensure consistent high-quality education and enhance teaching effectiveness regardless of mode of delivery (AACSB International, 2013; Kunz & Cheek, 2016).

In reaction to pressure from multiple constituencies, institutions of higher learning are challenged with making program improvements to address concerns about changing accreditation standards (Weldy, Spake, & Sneath, 2008), retention (Wolff & Tinney, 2006), and expectations of proof of student learning (Suskie, 2004). These pressures are especially significant for colleges and schools of business striving to meet changing standards for initial accreditation and reaccreditation set by the AACSB (AACSB International, 2013). An important requirement of AACSB standards is the need to evaluate the attainment of program objectives or assurance of learning (Thompson, 2004) using both direct and indirect measures of learning (Pringle & Michel, 2007).

The integration of different course formats into higher education warrants examining students' perceptions regarding the different delivery modes to determine future course offerings. Previous research has produced conflicting results relevant to students' perceptions of the different course formats. Fish and Snodgrass found that student perceptions of online courses improved as the number of online courses taken increased (2016). Previous research indicates positive experience with online courses and satisfaction with convenience, but expressed concerns over limited contact with other students and the instructor (Borstorff & Lowe, 2007; Sanford et al., 2017).

The significant growth in online instruction has led to many questions about the effectiveness of web-based courses compared to traditional course formats. This has produced a stream of research aimed at evaluating the quality of instruction in web-based courses. Prior studies have focused on evaluating different course formats by measuring learning outcomes (Coates et al., 2004; Crawford et al., 2008; Evans, 2015; Flanagan, 2014; Larson & Sung, 2009; and Ni, 2013), students' perceptions of learning (Bristow et al., 2011; Evans, 2015; Larson & Sung, 2009; Ni, 2013), and student satisfaction with different course formats (Bilbeisi & Minsky, 2014; Bristow, et al., 2011; Larson & Sung, 2009) using a variety of sources such as course evaluations, final exams, final course grades, and self-report surveys.

Previous research has also focused on the evaluation of various pedagogical tools such as blogs (Agosto et al., 2013), reflection tools (Williamson et al., 2015), and social networks (Arnold & Paulus, 2010) to identify effective tools for online learning. Additional studies have investigated the effectiveness of various tools for online delivery such as an interactive wall for content delivery (O'Rourke, Main, & Cooper, 2014), the use discussion boards and blogs (Williamson et al., 2015), and the use of interactive animation (Magdin & Turcani, 2016). While these studies have provided interesting results, most are limited by small sample sizes and focusing on the effectiveness of a single pedagogical tool.

Additional research has focused comparing the quality of instruction in different course formats based on learning outcomes. The results of these studies have produced interesting, yet contradictory results. Some studies have found that the effectiveness of instruction for learning outcomes is higher for traditional compared to Web-based courses (Coates, et al., 2004; Crawford et al., 2008; Evans, 2015; Flanagan, 2014; Gratton-Lavoie & Stanley, 2009; Mahmood et al., 2012; Trawick et al., 2010). The results of other studies have determined that the achievement level reached by students is lower in traditional courses compared to Web-based courses (Gratton-Lavoie & Stanley, 2009; Harmon et al., 2014; Means et al., 2010). To further cloud the issue, there are also numerous studies that have reported no statistically significant

differences between the different course formats (Cavanaugh & Jacquemin, 2015; Larson & Sung, 2009; Ni, 2013; Stack, 2015; Zacharis, 2010). The mixed results from previous studies warrant additional investigation on tools and techniques for effective delivery of online instruction.

This study attempted to bridge several gaps in the existing literature. First, by collecting data from a variety of business courses taught using different delivery modes. Second, the study evaluates student perceptions of differences in web-based and traditional courses relevant to learning, study time, expected grade, and self-teaching. Third, the study identified effective course design techniques and pedagogical tools for Web-based courses based on student perceptions.

Hypothesis 1: Students prefer the traditional course format to online and blended course formats.

Hypothesis 2: Students learn and retain more information in the traditional course format over online and blended course formats.

Hypothesis 3: Students tend to make higher grades in the traditional course format over online and blended course formats.

Hypothesis 4: Students spend more time studying in online and blended course formats over the traditional course format.

Hypothesis 5: Online and blended course formats require more self-teaching than the traditional course format.

Method

A survey was administered to 165 business students at an AACSB accredited university in the southeast. The survey solicited student perceptions in three primary areas. First, students were asked to indicate their preference for traditional, blended, or online course format. Second, students were asked about their experiences in different course formats relevant to learning, study time, expected grade, and self-teaching. Third, students provided input on the effectiveness of pedagogical tools used for Web-based delivery modes. A nominal scale was used to measure student preference and experience with different course formats and a five-point Likert scale with rankings from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree) was used to measure student perceptions regarding effective pedagogical tools. The survey also included questions relevant to respondent demographics such as gender, class rank, GPA, and number of hours worked each week. Participation in the study was voluntary and responses were confidential and anonymous in compliance with University Policy and the Institutional Review Board.

Percentage responses and descriptive statistics were calculated to evaluate student perceptions. To verify significant differences among the responses (traditional, online, blended) relevant to preference and experience, Multiple Range Tests, which applies a multiple comparison procedure (using Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) procedure), to determine which of the means of the three possible responses were conducted. Using Fisher's LSD procedure, there is a 5% chance of labeling each pair of means significantly different with the actual difference is 0.

Results

A total of 165 students participated in the study including 53% males and 47% females. The class rank of the respondents included 2% freshman, 16% sophomores, 28% juniors, and 54% seniors. The respondents included 13% with a 2.5 or lower GPA, 34%

had a GPA between 2.5 and 3.0, 32% had a GPA of 3.0 to 3.5, and 21% had a GPA of 3.5 or higher. A total of 35% of respondents worked 0-10 hours a week, 18% worked 11-20 hours, 22% worked 21-30 hours, 18% worked 31-40 hours, and 7% worked 40 or more hours weekly.

To measure the level of exposure to different course formats, the survey included two questions relevant to the number of blended and online courses the respondent had taken while attending the university. The responses indicated significant exposure to both blended and online course formats. In response to the number of online courses taken, 40% had taken at least one online course, 18% had taken two online courses, 11% had taken three online courses, 12% had taken four online courses, and 19% had taken five or more online courses. The number of blended courses completed by the respondents included 66% in one blended course, 16% had taken two blended courses, 8% had taken three blended courses, 2% had taken four blended courses, and 8% had taken five or more blended courses.

In response to the course format preference question, 76% indicated a preference for the traditional course format, 12% preferred the blended course format, and 12% indicated a preference for taking online courses. The responses to the experience questions varied across the different course formats. The results indicate that respondents believe they learn and retain more information in traditional courses (87%) followed by blended courses (9%). The respondents indicated that they spend more time studying in traditional courses (59%) and online courses (29%), and tend to make higher grades in traditional courses (69%) followed by online courses (24%). There was a significant difference in the responses for the question about which course format requires more self-teaching with 88% indicating online courses and 9% indicating blended courses require more self-teaching.

Results of the Multiple Range Tests indicated significant differences, at the 95% confidence level among each of the responses (traditional, online, blended) for preferred course format, learn and retain more information, spend more time studying, and tend to make better grades. The traditional course format was the most favored, followed by online and blended for the preferred course format for each of the items. The results support Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 for the traditional course format relevant to preference (H1), learning and retaining more information (H2), and making higher grades (H3). Hypothesis 4 was not supported as the results indicated that students spend more time studying in traditional courses over online and blended courses. The item requires more self-teaching, was different: the majority felt that the online format, followed by blended and classroom required the most self-teaching in support of hypothesis 5. The mean responses for each of the items are different at the 95% confidence level.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the questions regarding effective pedagogical tools for online delivery. The means for the pedagogical tools were fairly close at Podcast lectures (3.8), course content videos (3.4), publisher homework applications (3.09), and threaded discussion/forums (2.9). Results of the Multiple Range Tests indicated no significant differences among the various pedagogical tools. Although not an all-inclusive list, the pedagogical tools included on the survey are tools commonly used for online delivery by a majority of faculty in the business college.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that students tend to have a more positive experience overall in courses taught using the traditional delivery mode. The results show that students prefer to take traditional courses, learn and retain more in traditional classes, and tend to make higher grades in traditional courses. This could possibly be attributed to the fact that students also indicated that they spend more time studying for traditional courses and that traditional courses require less self-teaching than other

course formats. A comparison of perceptions for online and blended courses shows more varied results. The results for blended and online courses were equal regarding preference and showed very little difference in perceptions relevant to learning and retaining information. However, students indicated that they spend more time studying in online courses and tend to make higher grades in online versus blended course formats. The most significant result was that online courses followed by blended courses require more self-teaching.

The results also indicate some preference for podcasts and videos for learning and understanding course content over publisher homework applications and threaded discussion or forums. However, the results did not indicate significant differences among the pedagogical tools.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate preference for traditional courses over Web-based courses, and a more positive experience in traditional courses over online courses and in online courses over blended courses. The contradiction is that the results fall short of explaining the dramatic increase in enrollment in Web-based courses. One explanation could be the tools and techniques used to deliver Web-based courses. The convenience of taking courses online could be negated by the need to teach yourself the content.

A critical focus of institutions of higher learning is delivering quality instruction regardless of the delivery method used. In response to the increasing number of Web-based courses offered, it is imperative to examine the quality of instruction in these courses. Important steps in this direction include determining students' perceptions relevant to different course formats, developing direct and indirect measures of learning outcomes, and evaluating the effectiveness of different pedagogical tools for online learning delivery methods.

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